

Black Theatre: Cross Cultural Images

Black British Theatre: A Cultural Comparison to African American Theatre

Research Thesis

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Abstract:

I will compare and illustrate the cultural differences realized in Black British Theatre as compared to African American Theatre. Black British culture is very interesting to me in that its origins are very similar to African American culture, but its development was very different from that of African American societies. These differences are directly reflected in the plays and demonstrated in the theatre produced by each group, and in their subsequent interpretation. In my research thesis I will discuss several African American plays in comparison to Black British plays which will explore the differences between the two. Theatre has always been nurtured by the culture and society that surrounds it. It is, therefore, not a surprise that plays often reflect the histories of the cultures they reside within. Black British and American Theatre are no exception. American Theatre has been dotted with many Black playwrights who have documented the history, struggles and culture of African Americans. America and Britain have had a long standing parent/child relationship throughout the past that has recently changed. The cultural exchange between American and British society in recent years has been a constant back and forth flow of information, ideas, music, arts, trade and economics. This is especially evident in the later 20th and early 21st century. However, despite this cultural exchange the experiences of Blacks in America and Blacks in Britain have been distinctly different. Historically, England abolished slavery in 1833, years before America. The relationship of African American culture and Black British culture is a strange mix. It is a dance of a close cultural exchange with a distinct separate evolution in which the two cultures separate only to join again and exchange their newly developed ideas. This exchange has been seen greatly in recent years, African American Theatre has influenced and been influenced greatly by Black British Theatre.

Part I: Culture

The interactions between African American culture and Black British culture is a complex mix of style, tradition, and customs. Throughout the decades there has been a dance of close cultural exchange with a distinct separate evolution, wherein the two cultures separate only to join again and exchange their newly developed ideas. I will examine the ways that Black British Theatre and African American Theatre are similar and different. I will identify the major differences between the two. It is my intention to highlight these differences by looking at the origins of both cultures.

To better understand what I mean by culture, I will describe its basic characteristics as put forth by Pr. Anthony Walsh in his book, *Law, Justice, and Society*, 2013. Walsh states: “The basic characteristics of culture are the totality of learned, socially transmitted behaviors, ideas, values, customs, artifacts, and technology of groups of people living in a common society” (Walsh & Hemmens 4). These behaviors are learned from generation to generation. Walsh continues by describing the six primary characteristics of culture. Many of these characteristics are intertwined and significantly affect one another.

The first of Walsh’s primary characteristics of culture is beliefs; these are the ideas we hold to be truth in regards to how the world operates and what is true or false (Walsh & Hemmens). One example of how beliefs changed in a society is the way in which slavery was viewed in America. During the time that the possession of Blacks was common in American belief and practiced in reality, American society developed laws that supported slavery. For example, the U.S. Constitution defined a Black person as three fifths of a person. As the society’s fundamental beliefs within its culture change, then the laws subsequently change to reflect those alterations. As in the case of slavery, when it was no longer considered permissible

and against the nation's beliefs, the Constitution was amended to reflect that change. The resulting change produced the Thirteenth Amendment. This amendment outlaws slavery to fit the beliefs of the society.

The second primary characteristic of culture is values. "Values refer to normative standards shared by the culture about what is good and bad, correct and incorrect moral and immoral, normal and deviant" (Walsh & Hemmens 4). Common American values include the following: justice, equality, liberty, and sanctity of life, many of which are protected and honored in the American legal system. "Shared values are an important binding force in culture, and a set of values for the individual to live by is also viewed as important for binding the disparate parts of our personalities into a coherent self-concept" (Walsh & Hemmens 5). Many individuals in the same society share the same values. Values in any nation are often closely entwined with the most prominent religions found in that society. Christianity has had an extensive influence on English and later American societies, reaching deeply into these societies cultural values.

The next two primary characteristics of culture are norms and symbols. Norms (or customs) are the action component of a value or a belief. Rarely are laws passed that contradict with the deeply held cultural values. The cultural norms of society can range in their weight. Some are less serious than others, but they play a big role in shaping the day to day lives of individuals in that society. For example in some communities it is a cultural norm for there to be a heavy involvement between the community and family life. This would be cognizant of a community that lived by the phrase "It takes a village to raise a child". Symbols are concrete physical signs that "stand for" and signify abstractions that form mundane things that evoke the deepest of feelings. For example during the civil rights movement in the U.S. in the late 1950s and 1960s, the phrase "Ungawa Black-Power" was used extensively, and almost exclusively in

conjunction with the symbol of a raised black fist. This symbol by its self is relatively meaningless; however once adopted by the Black cultural movement it gained significance and recognition. Even today in the United States a raised black fist is identified as a symbol of Black pride.

Technology (or artifacts), another characteristic of culture, “is the totality of the knowledge and techniques a people employ to create material objects for their sustenance and comfort,” (Walsh & Hemmens 6). Different technologies create different physical worlds. Technological growth has been seen in all societies. The United States and Britain have both been through technology booms, such as the industrial age, or the internet age. Technology has been of great value to theatre aiding in the advancement of scenery construction, ultimately allowing greater presentational techniques to be used. For example, lighting advancements such as spot lights, projections, and diverse lighting techniques; sound advancements such as over-speakers, microphones, and recorded voice overs; and advanced stage technology such as rising platforms, and automated scenery or puppets, are a result of technological advances. However technology has also been a hindrance to theatre if not the terminator in disguise. Technology through the addition of cinema motion pictures has placed the proverbial nail in theatre attendance’s coffin. Theatre is unique in that it requires an audience to live. Theatre is not possible without people.

Theatre differs from other art forms because of the necessity of an audience. Visual Arts need only one individual to be present to observe it and doesn’t actively interact with that individual. Even in the case of musical performances, which are often viewed by large audiences; an individual can listen to the same song alone. This creates the major difference

between theatre and other art forms. Dr. Richard Courtney, a theatre scholar who worked on linking psychology, philosophy and anthropology to theatre, said:

An audience is a necessary precondition for theatre... It is a collection of persons in which each responds both as an individual and as a member of the group.

Psychoanalytically three things occur within each audience member: his unconscious reacts to the unconscious level of the presentation; he synthesizes its content, intent and coherence. But in the playhouse an audience is a prerequisite: it joins in the creation of the art work which, without this reaction, does not exist... Theatre art has an immediacy lacking in any other art form (Courtney 124).

Cinematic presentations like art pieces in a museum also can be viewed by a single individual and can be enjoyed without multiple people. It has no requirement for a live audience of multiple members and no immediate interaction between parties.

The last of the six primary characteristics of culture is language. Language is information about culture; it enables us to discuss simple, profound or abstract concepts. Words mean what they mean because a given culture agrees that they do. The English language is something that has been shared by British Theatre with American Theatre. It is described as “a language ideally suited for drama: it’s spoken differently from the way it is written, it’s supple, highly imagistic, highly idiomatic, has simple if casual rules of grammar and – most importantly – an extensive range of tone” (Eyre & Wright 13). In 1852, Jakob Grimm, a German philologist said “Of all modern Languages, not one has acquired such great strength and vigour as the English... it may justly be called THE LANGUAGE OF THE WORLD and seems, like the English nation, to be destined to reign in future with still more extensive sway over all parts of the globe... It is also a fact that much of the life of that language has been stimulated by the theatre, which depends on

the distillation of stylization of colloquial speech.” Theatre has been used to spread language throughout its history.

Another important variable to consider is cultural identity. According to Webster, identity is “the persistent and continuous unity of the individual person normally attested by continuity of memory with present consciousness” (Incorporated). For the purposes of this paper I am going to use an adapted definition of what I have come to understand identity to be. Identity is the way a person recognizes themselves and others. Identity essentially is the connection we have with the world around us, whether that world is established through location, the people around us or the cultural societies one is born into. It is a way to differentiate people and categorize an individual’s relationship to the world around them. Each identity is unique and contains something special about the individual even if they can’t articulate it verbally.

In the 1998, Volume 2 issue 1, of the *Personality and Social Psychology Review* periodical, one article spoke exclusively about the formation of the African American identity. *The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity* defines racial identity as that part of the person's self-concept that is related to her/his membership within a race. “It is concerned with both the significance the individual places on race in defining him/herself and the individual's interpretations of what it means to be black” (Sellers, A., Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous). Identity is very important in regards to the way an individual relates to culture, race, society and their own community. Identity by its self is an expansive topic. Cultural identity is how I will look at identity within this paper, identity as elated to culture, and how we identify ourselves as a part of a particular culture. I would like to narrow that subject to focus primarily on how cultural identity influences theatre and is displayed through playwrights in their play.

To understand the rise and intersection of African American culture and Black British culture it is important to transmit the defining cultural characteristics that have become so significant in both groups particularly in the portrayal of history through theatre. I will look at dramatic texts that spring from both of these groups. Playwrights are the people, artists, and personalities who produce these texts and have changed the landscape of theatre throughout history. "Playwrights; it is they, on the whole, who have changed the theatre, the demands of their content obligation those who stage the play- and musicals- to seek new modes of presentation...it is actors who provide the theatre, not with its change, but with its continuity" (Eyer & Wright 17). Actors and even directors, though fundamental to the continuation of theatre, do not play as large a role in the creation of new play-text as playwrights themselves. "The playwright has to balance revelation against concealment, has to animate character through action rather than description, has to juggle relationships, plot, entrances and exits by sleight of hand, and above all has to engage the attention of the audience consistently at the instant of performance" (Eyer & Wright 21-22,). Play-text is the foundation of theatre. By examining certain play-text I will be able to peek into the culture and societies described therein.

Cultural Influences in America

As I mentioned earlier Britain and America have a very close cultural history. The beginnings of the English dealings with Blacks were through Africa and their subsequent involvement with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The English brought Black slaves into America to help build new colonies. With them, Black slaves brought African art forms including theatre and African tradition of oral story-telling. African Theatre was unique from that of other European art forms. It relied heavily on dance and music to fully tell the story. As Dr. Osita Okagbue discusses in his book, *Culture and Identity in African and African Caribbean Theatre*;

Dance and music are key structural elements in African and African Caribbean plays – in fact, only very few plays from Africa or the Caribbean are without these two artistic and expense mediums. When they are used, they are not just cosmetic since they contribute greatly to the texturing and structuring of the plays, as well as being very dependable codes of meaning in themselves (193).

Africans who came over in the slave trade brought with them the importance of incorporating dance and music in their art. The majority of the African American populations in the United States are descendants of Africans who were held captive as slaves brought to America between 1619 and 1865 (History.com). Blacks from the Caribbean, who later immigrated to the United States, are also recognized as African Americans. The first African slaves were brought into Virginia in 1619; however the population of slaves greatly increased in the 18th Century. By the early 1700s, there were over 25,000 slaves in the American colonies. Africans were brought over through the Middle passage, otherwise known as the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean by slave ships, establishing the circumstances of black slaves in America (History.com). Blacks at this time were seen as little more than livestock to white slave owners. They were bought, sold, and on rare occasions, freed.

African American culture began to define itself at this point in the early 1700s. “In discussing the culture of Black slaves in America we are reminded that among the demands made of African captives who survived the harrowing Middle Passage was the adoption of a new and strange language” (Hill & Hatch 21). Language, one of the characteristics of culture, was an issue for many slaves. African slaves arriving in the U.S. had many difficulties communicating with white slave owners and each other. Though they all shared the same skin color many Black slaves were from different tribes and cultures speaking many different languages.

Slave owners often only taught them enough English to accomplish their daily work and understand the basics of the Christian religion. At this time America was still but an English colony controlled by the English Crown a Christian based government. This is where the importance of music in African culture and arts became ingrained in Black American culture. Black slaves learned language through church songs and religious hymns. African slaves were expected to drop their previous tribal religions and adopt Christianity. Music became a large part of this process.

As time passed and the American colonies expanded, American colonist grew dissatisfied with the treatment they received from the controlling English Crown. The American Revolutions broke out in the late 1700s. During the American Revolution (1776-1789), many Blacks participated in the conflict, free and slave alike. The United States separated itself from English control. However, the forming of the Constitution did little to grant freedoms or rights to slaves in America. “But it did teach many blacks a lesson that freedom was worth fighting for” (Hill & Hatch 17). Though the United States was now separated from English control, American culture reflected that of England for a long time. The parent child relationship between Britain and the U.S. became more about culture than actual political control. Although American culture was being influenced by strong beliefs of freedom and liberty, it still possessed minimal differences from the English arts and theatre at this point.

The International Slave Trade was eventually abolished by Congress, at the urging of President Thomas Jefferson. “The prospect of a final end to the African slave trade spurred a frantic drive to capture and ship from African ports as many Blacks as possible before the prohibition date of 1808” (Hill & Hatch, 15). The history of the American slave trade is essential to understanding the unique shaping of African American communities inside of American

society. The difficulties faced by African Americans after slavery ended, with the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, were great. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 made Blacks full U.S. citizens. However, equality for Blacks would not come for a long time. These ideas were reflected in cultural art forms including that of theatre.

Central to the development of Black communities was the Black church. As previously mentioned, Black slaves were expected to accept Christianity and the church became the only refuge many Blacks had in such a difficult new life. By 1800 Black churches were seen throughout the U.S. These churches served as centers wherein Blacks could gather in relative safety and celebrate Black heritage without fear. The Church served as a center for education, as religion has throughout history. Bibles and hymn books were some of the only books Blacks were allowed to have and even exposure to these were limited.

The Black Church was a large part of the beginning of the distinctive African American cultural identity. It was where Blacks could go to form their own culture and connect with others in their community. One of the most beneficial products of the Black church was the creation and evolution of Black music in America. “Prof. Eileen Southern has written extensively on the music of Black Americans. In her article *An Origin for the Negro Spiritual* Professor Southern defined the spiritual as the religious musical expression of Black folk in the United States” (Hill & Hatch 21). Negro Spirituals are used excessively and nearly exclusively in African American plays. In fact, it is one of the things that make African American Theatre unique.

For a long time it was thought that Negro Spirituals were created amongst the cotton fields while slaves labored away. This however is not true:

Southern debunked the myth that spirituals were invented by slaves as they labored in the cotton fields; instead, it is affirmed, the evidence suggested that the song type originated

in the black churches of the North where black congregations, freed from the supervision of white clergymen, could conduct their religious services as they wished (Hill & Hatch 22).

These songs then eventually spread down South to be sung in cotton fields. There are several things that made African American music so unique. The most influential being West African music. Some distinct characteristics of West African music were integrated in Negro Spirituals. For example:

The call-and-response format by soloist and chorus found a similar pattern in dance, where two single individuals or groups move alternately. Though antiphonal singing is fairly widespread...the African variety unusual in its consistent use of overlapping phrases by leader and respondents, as if each were seeking to outdo the other. The final trait – more moral than musical – comprised satiric song and is parallel in derisive dance; one dependent on sharpened wit and the other on pungent mime (Hill & Hatch 22).

These unique traits were often seen in early African American arts and theatre.

Black Arts in America

Due to the great migration north at the turn of the twentieth century Blacks lived in many large cities. After World War I there was a bevy of jobs available in the North. Cities such as Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, and New York City, saw hundreds of thousands of migrating Blacks filling the streets. “They came trekking north with their tales of suffering and endurance, bringing their music, poetry, and dance – all that had sustained them over the bitter years. By the thousands they came, carrying their ‘long and boney dreams’ for freedom, for education, and packing in their bags were the stories that would become the literature, poetry, and drama of the

Harlem Renaissance” (Hill & Hatch 214). The urbanization of many American cities took place with the growth of Black migration north; especially New York, Washington and Chicago. The 1920’s had christened itself variously as the New Negro, the Negro Renaissance, the Negro Awakening, and the Jazz Age and finally The Harlem Renaissance though named after Harlem, New York, was seen in some way in each of these major cities (Hill and Hatch 215). “African American theatre began in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s’ and 1930s” (Langlois).

African American art, jazz, blues, writing and poetry sprang up in these cities. “Successful black musicals became popular, and thrived. Unfortunately it didn’t last. White investors saw how much money was to be made in producing musicals, started to shut blacks out” (Langlois). Black plays of this time focused on the American social structure, the inequalities of society caused by race, and the Black family structure in America.

Despite being the beginning of African American theatre the Renaissance was not what all believed it to be. “The Renaissance, a symbol of renewal, was a lie since most of them (Blacks) began their ‘freedom’ with little, except their culture, which had been nurtured in the segregated south” (Hill & Hatch 215). The essence of their culture was all a black person of this time needed. Freedom real or imagined in society became more important in the cultural since in regards to expression. Freedom of expression grew despite constant social setbacks.

Black plays, especially of the South, were constantly considered controversial. Lynching plays of the 1920s, which told the stories of those terrorized in the Jim Crow South, often focused on the Black male and his story, despite the fact that it is his family that must live with the pain left in the wake of his passing. One African American playwright, Georgia Douglass Johnson, focusses on the Black female family member’s response to the situation.

The Little Theatre Movement was initiated at the beginning of the 20th century its main goal was to provide a forum to free dramatic forms and methods of production from the limitations of the large commercial theatre. These ideas were inspired by revolutionary European theatre artists of the late 19th century, such as Max Reinhardt, Gordon Craig, and the Théâtre-Libre of Paris (Little Theatre: Encyclopedia Britannica). This was accomplished by establishing small experimental centers of drama, a few examples being the Toy Theatre in Boston, the Little Theatre in Chicago (1912), the Little Theatre in New York City (1912), and The Washington Square Players (1915) (Little Theatre: Encyclopedia Britannica). They all made waves in American theatre by encouraging freedom of expression, staging the works of fresh new young playwrights, and selecting plays based solely on their artistic merit.

African American playwrights also found a place in the Little Theatre Movement, one that had been lacking in main stage America. The focus on African American folk plays, in the Little Theatre Movement, caused a shift in the dynamics of Black theatre in the 1930s. Surprisingly, though focused on folk plays the Movement was originated from urban intellectuals and not through the Black folk or country population. Writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois (Ph. D. Harvard), Alain Le Roy Locke (Ph. D. Harvard), Jessie Redevion Fauset (Phi Beta Kappa, Cornell), illustrated their interpretations of folk culture, promoting it as an Black art form. “A general feeling prevailed that the folk plays, by dignifying the people’s struggles, extended a kind of egalitarian democracy to the rural people, and that the simple lives of these oppressed people offered a deep expression of an abiding spirit” (Hill & Hatch 216). One of the earliest Black female playwrights was Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960). Although remarkable, her works were little known during her life time.

Hurston won the ‘Opportunity’ contest twice, held by a magazine of the same name for black writers to have a forum to write, first with her play *Color Struck* (1925), a savage portrayal of color prejudice within the race, and the next year with *The First One* (1926), an exploration of original sin when, wherein the character, Noah betrayed his black son, Ham. She was born in Eatonville, Florida, an all-black-town where her father was mayor. She grew up surrounded by “black folk and their jobs, stories, and legends-folklore that would permeate her writing. Known primarily as a novelist and anthropologist, she wrote at least 10 plays between 1925 and 1935” (Hill & Hatch 218-9). Her success, however, did not last.

In 1949, Hurston disappeared from publishing and few bothered to read her novels or folklore. “She died in obscurity and poverty in 1960. After Robert Hemingway’s biography of Hurston appeared in 1978, her books were reprinted. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was acclaimed a classic and used widely in college literature classes” (Hill & Hatch 219). Zora Neale Hurston was the forerunner of many Black playwrights, specifically female African American playwrights. Without her work artists such as Lorraine Hansberry would never have had their chance to expose the world to the Black experience through theatrical performance.

The play *A Raisin in the Sun* speaks to all of these issues, bringing the Black experience to the forefront of the American conscience. Lorraine Hansberry’s play premiered on March 11, 1959, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City (Langlois). This play was the first written by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway; additionally, it was the first produced by any Black writer to win the prestigious New York Drama Critics Award (Langlois). This play reached large audiences in regard to allowing those audiences a truthful insight into African American lives. Many plays produced previous to this had been written

predominately by white playwrights describing the Black experience from the white prospective; such as Roger and Hammerstein's *Porgy and Bess*.

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* Stood as the most viewed successful encounters with racial issues displayed on stage. It went on to inspired other civil rights plays, including the Chicago musical *Kicks and Company* (1962), written by Oscar Brown Jr. and Robert Nemiroff. This piece, about the Devil working against the Civil Rights Movement, was eventually directed by Lorraine Hansberry. Based loosely on the brutal killing of Emmett Till, "James Baldwin's drama *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) over the next thirty years became a standard for black colleges and considered by some to be equal to Baldwin's earlier drama *Amen Corner* (1954)" (Hill & Hatch 380). It was as he said dedicated "to the dead children of Birmingham."

During my first trip to London I saw a large quantity of Black British Theatre and African American plays performed by Black British actors. It was while participating in The Ohio State's London Theatre Study Abroad Tour, I attended the National Theatre's 2013, revival of *The Amen Corner*. *The Amen Corner* was written by an African American playwright named James Baldwin. The play is focused on an African American family in Harlem, N.Y. In this production the African American characters were all portrayed by Black British actors. In essence the performance was founded on Black British actors interpretation and understanding of African American culture.

The theme of religion, or more specifically Christianity, is prevalent throughout Black shows, usually in juxtaposition to controversy within the family. One line in the play says, "Set your house in order, for thou shall't die and not live again." Another line states, "When you got's trouble in the home, the home comes first." The dynamic of family has been explored extensively in theatre, but in Black theatre the story is always told differently. This is due to a

history going all the way back to slavery, of divided families. There is normally a focus on the father figure or lack thereof with a strong female or mother figure running the home. Special emphasis, with regard to the story, is given if the father is present.

This dichotomy is represented in several plays. For example, in Hansberry's, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the father figure is absent due to death and the mother figure, though strong, is shifting the family responsibility to her eldest son, in this case inciting near disaster. In August Wilson's *Fences* (1983), set in 1957, the father figure creates the most strife in the family by stepping outside his marital vows and having an affair, resulting in broken relationships and an illegitimate child. In Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*, the father figure is absent for the majority of the character's lives. The play begins with his re-entry into their lives causing continued chaos.

American identity, especially African American identity, was well represented by emphasizing key identity marks in the African American culture such as family ties, music, and religion. Family and familial relationships are a large part of all American identities but most especially African American identities. In *The Amen Corner* a great deal of different familial relationships are seen. Everything from husband and wife relationships, to father and son, to sibling relationships are represented in this play. As an African American woman who has been raised in Ohio and has either experienced or witnessed many of these types of relationships, I would have to say that the Black British actors did an amazing job of portraying these relationships; especially with a British perspective on an American Family.

Throughout the play, the relationship between Odessa and Margret is a strong example of a supporting relationship. Margret is the younger sister who has a vision and Odessa is the older, wiser sister who has dedicated herself to supporting and protecting her sister. One of the most important relationships explored in *The Amen Corner* is that of a single mother and her son.

From my perspective viewing this type of relationship presented by a Black British cast dealing with issues that were faced by African Americans of the 1950s was humbling, especially considering the level of dedication the actors undertook with their roles.

The identity of David, Margret's son, was of great interest to me. David struggled the most with dealing with family, music, religion and how it impacted his development. Throughout the whole show David was going through a very transitional part of his life where he was finding and solidifying his identity. Watching Eric Kofi Abrefa, a Black British actor, played a character who was going through the process of developing his identity was particularly interesting. He was in the process of fighting the confining identity of a Gospel musician. His mother intended for him to one day run the church in her stead. David struggled with the decision of living his own life or following the life his mother had out-lined for him. He was faced with the decision of what identifiers in his life were most important and which ones he was going to let himself be guided by.

Eric was very lively in his portrayal of David. I feel that he truly embraced the confusion and uncertainty that American youth are faced with when working through the process of defining their identity, especially when there are others who are trying to define it for them. Eric specifically had the challenge of representing a young African American man on the cusp of adulthood in the 1950s, to which he did a phenomenal job. The 1950s as discussed before was a very difficult time in which the Civil Rights movement was just heating up, with great societal changes on the horizon.

A very important part of the collective African American culture is religion. One scene that I thought was amazingly powerful was that in which the character, Ida Jackson, lost her baby and confronted Margret in the church. In this scene the mother who lost her child entered the

church and stood on top of the alter before crying out to the Lord. Margret entered stage left and for the first time in this production she was standing visually lower than someone else on stage. This scene represents not only a loss of power to Margret but also a loss of will. It forced Margret to face a very literal reflection of her past pain, while questioning what really led her to God.

The National Theatre's production of *The Amen Corner* focuses a great deal on music and its impact on individual's life as well as concepts of identity. One major part of the African American culture and identity is 'Gospel' music. In this production of *The Amen Corner*, the London Community Gospel Choir sang and performed. One comment made by a reviewer from the *Independent* said "The London Community Gospel Choir launch into joyous hymn that reverberates divinely around the Olivier auditorium" (Taylor). I have seen many African American choirs perform and it is my opinion that The London Community Gospel Choir did just as good of a job in conveying the message and importance of 'Gospel' music as any African American Choir.

Many of the comments made about this production were in direct relation to the music and the use of music in the show. A large part of African American identity is music and rhythm. James Baldwin wrote several songs for the play for very specific reasons. Baldwin doesn't make secret his personal religious background and how it was a very important part of not only his identity but also that of the African American community he was raised in. As such he uses music, specifically 'Gospel' music, often in his writings; *The Amen Corner* is a prime example.

To fully appreciate 'Gospel' music, you as the listener must be immersed in it. By using a live choir and band that accompanied the production, the National Theatre was able to pull in the audience, who were seated in a large auditorium, directly into the action and make them feel a

part of the experience. Another way I felt the performance of *The Amen Corner* was able to help the audience member feel a part of a world and community that they may not be familiar with was by having the musicians on stage and visible to the audience. In traditional Black churches the musicians usually stay on stage during the entire service. I thought that having the musicians on stage, but off to the side, was a brilliant directorial choice. African Americans music is such a constant part of Black life that it is nearly ever present. It was very ingenious of the director to include music as a constant presence on stage. The musicians played background music throughout the show, as well as accompanying the big choir numbers. It was through the use of music, religion, and family that *The Amen Corner* was able to help the audience relate to the African American cultural identity.

A Stylistic Movement

African American Theatre during and in reaction to the civil rights movement, reflected the racial struggle and unrest of that time. The Black Cultural Movement picked up speed during the Civil Rights Movement. Black Arts in particular exploded during the 1950s and 60s. “Perhaps the most successful of the civil rights plays was Ossie Davis’ *Purlie Victorious* (1961), a satire of southern plantation stereotypes which played Broadway for 231 performances” (Hill & Hatch 381). Davis himself starred in it as a young preacher with the famed Ruby Dee as his wife. In 1970 the script was adapted into the musical *Purlie*. “Part of the musical’s success was its use of traditional gospel, a style the civil rights movement had made familiar to white audiences during the 1960s” (Hill & Hatch 381). African American culture was found to be accessible in this form to white audiences.

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) came about in response to the death of Malcolm X. It began in 1965 and dissolved around 1975, but has had a large influence on Black Arts in

America since then. The Civil Rights Movement fostered an influx in the Black Arts and Black cultural identity, however there was a de-flux in Black Arts in the 1970s. Change started with the National Black Political Convention (NBPC) in Gary, Indiana, in 1972. It was a gathering of over three thousand delegates and five thousand observers, that sought to unify the diverse spectrum of African American activist into a single party capable of wielding nation political power. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Much of the NBPC broke apart fracturing many connections in the party. Hill and Hatch describe troubles in Black Arts Movement:

The Black Arts Movement drifted, losing its funding. Theatre groups disbanded. Nonetheless, its excitement, its creativity, its writers, actors, and companies had created an era more fecund than the Harlem Renaissance. Even though the great majority of companies collapsed within a few years, black theatre had changed American theatre forever. Black playwrights had placed on the stage a variety of African Americans never seen before, characters who reflected the nation's population more accurately. Writers had moved from the racial periphery of theatre toward the center; they were now considered skillful and worthy of commercial and college venues. Racial attitudes and issues, previously restricted to segregated black audiences, now played to all audiences, and the old stereotypes gradually muted. These changes brought black patrons to the box office, and producers began to plan their plays and advertising to attract them. The movement had created respect and influence internationally (Hill & Hatch 427-8).

The NBPC was a turning point for Black theatre, producing new work with an edge that was unseen during the 1960s. This was a time that the Black theatre cultivated even more of its own identity and genera.

It was in the 1970s that we saw the rise of fresh new playwrights such as Ntozake Shange, an African American female poet turned playwright. Her most popular work is the play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, written in 1975. At the time of publication Shange provided no subtitle or descript indicating that this play was a choreopoem. Neal A. Lester, a critic, defined 'choreopoem' as "a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music- those elements that out-line a distinctly African American heritage" (Hill & Hatch 425). By breaking from the traditional play writing style of linear dialogue between two or more characters and dividing the play into progressive acts, Shange stepped away from, and essentially rejected the European aesthetics and embraced the African. African theatre often lives with opposition without the necessity of closure, and includes repetition as intensification. Shange's play did not follow the English view of current plays which at this time had to have a beginning with rising action, middle with a climax, and a resolving end.

Shange's 'choreopoem' differed immensely from the poetry, music, and movement that had dominated African American stages since the 60s. "Shange's poetry revealed for the first time on stage unexpressed experiences held in the hearts by many black women. Her work appeared during the rise of the white feminist movement, and much of the box-office support Shange received came from women... Women, black and white, supported the play" (Hill & Hatch 426). However from the Black community Shange did not receive favorable responses from all corners. Many Black men felt attacked by the play.

In response to her choreopoem many Black playwrights wrote plays to contradict the attacks or supposed negative messages including, Angela Jackson's, *Shango Diaspora: An African-American Myth of Womanhood and Love* (1982) and Bonnie Wright, who attempted to

write a final chapter to the male-female conflict with her play *No Colored Girls/No Colored Boys Allowed* (1990) (Hill & Hatch 426). An additional reaction in play form was written by Keith Antar Mason, founder and director of the Los Angeles Black Repertory Company. It was written in a style similar to Shange's, "Mason in 1991 premiered his full-length poem *for black boys who have considered homicide when the streets were too much*. His title embraced his thesis; making the angst and precarious lines of teen males manifest" (Hill & Hatch 427). Despite the opposition faced by Shange's choreopoem it has gained significant support in recent years, especially considering the 2010 film adaptation *For Colored Girls*, written and directed by Tyler Perry. The film had an all-star ensemble cast including Janet Jackson, Whoopi Goldberg, Philicia Rashad, Thandie Newton, Loretta Devine, Anika Noni Rose, Kimberly Elise, and Kerry Washington.

After Shange's success more Black playwrights started to take the limelight telling the African American story. One such playwright was George C. Wolfe. He was born on 23 September, 1954 in Frankfort, Kentucky. In the early 1980s Wolfe worked at the Hatch-Billops Collections, an archive of African American Theatre. This exposure was one of his main inspirations for his play *The Colored Museum*, which in 1981 premiered at the Crossroads Theatre Company of New Jersey (Hill & Hatch 439-441). *The Colored Museum* was a completely different style of production from the Black plays that had come before it. It was not the classic realism of Hansberry's, *A Raisin in the Sun*, nor was it a choreopoem like Shange's work. It was new, cutting, and a fresh look at Black culture. *The Colored Museum* stretches beyond being a mere representation of Black culture; it comments on it in a clear satirical and mocking fashion.

The play was a conglomeration of scenes or exhibits featuring Black figures and stereotypes; including basketball stars, the mammy stereotype, the exploitation of slavery, the fear of homosexuality, the exoticism of miscegenation, the banality of the mammy stereotype, the superficiality of Ebony magazine, the drug legacy of Vietnam, the supposed tyranny of black hair styles and teen pregnancy, the beatification of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the Josephine Baker legend. According to Hill and Hatch, his most outrageous of his parodies was a comic caricature of black males who saw themselves as victims of “the man”. Examples being the character, Bigger Thomas, in *Native Son*; Walter Lee Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*; Beau Willie in *For Colored Girls*.

Wolfe was criticized for his satiric version of:

The most sacred image in African American theatre, ‘Big-Mama-on-the-couch,’ the mother who dominated her family in the names of love and survival. For this and for using the word ‘colored,’ Wolfe was roundly abused by Blacks; nonetheless, his wit and theatrical inventiveness enabled laughter to triumph. African American Theatre had been reborn with an edge, having no self-pity, no stereotypes, and a style that shunned realism (Hill & Hatch 441).

Wolfe stepped beyond the classic theatre renditions of producing a fully realistic play, instead he created a play that may even be closer to the truth of Black culture in America than traditional realism would allow. Ultimately *The Colored Museum* propelled Wolfe into the most frenetic and creative years of his life. He adapted of three stories by Zora Neale Hurston, and formed the show *Spunk* (1989). Then went on to write direct “*Jelly’s Last Jam* (1991), a musical based on the life of New Orleans jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton” (Hill & Hatch 442). Wolfe was eventually appointed artistic director of the Joseph Papp Public Theatre where he initiated his

vision that “Everybody had to come with truth, clarity, and the artistic talent to astonish.” Wolfe said for him, “Humility is tremendously overrated. Reality and racism are gonna try and humble you, so there’s absolutely no reason in the world for you to do it yourself” (Hill & Hatch 442).

Wolfe was clear in his assessment as to where the nation was situated in regard to color and race and the work of theatre to not only comment on it but to raise the stakes.

Plays Looking Back: *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*

Alternately, in later years many plays were written about the 1950s and the civil rights period. Plays of the 1990s started to look back and gave many a clear perspective of the past. For example, Lynn Nottage’s 1995 play *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* is set in 1950 Brooklyn, NY. Nottage’s play title was inspired by Langston Hughes poem *Luck*. This play is seen by many as approaching a pre-civil rights era play. It is set in a time where social injustices happened often and at the very beginning of the civil rights movement. There are several cultural issues expressed in this play. For example, the given circumstances of the play reflect the cultural issues faced by African Americans of that time. Nottage’s first play *Poof* (1993), first presented at the Actors Theatre’s Humana Festival in Louisville, Kentucky also struggled with similar themes. It won the Heideman Award for ATL’s National Ten-Minute Play Contest.

The story of *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* is told from the point of view of Ernestine Crump, a 17-year-old high school senior. Ernestine’s decisions are directly affected by her given circumstances, such as the very recent death of her mother, which results in her family moving north to New York from Florida. The relocation of the Crump family north is a reflection of the Black migration north in the 1920s. Many headed to New York to begin anew. Ernestine Crump’s mother died only a few months prior to the events in the play and the whole family is feeling the ramifications.

Ernestine's primary objective in the play is to keep the peace until she graduates from high school and can go to college and make a better life for herself. She does this by concentrating in school and getting good grades, unlike her sister Ermina who is now enamored with boys and the new city life. In one scene Ernestine reprimands Ermina's flirtation with boys behaving more like a mother than an older sister.

Ernestine purposefully does not express her opinions to the other family members so that she does not upset them or cause any more difficulties. Often she will escape reality to express herself in what she sees as her only refuge 'Movies' or what she calls 'Pictures'. Ernestine often imagines what she wished would happen in her life through surreal 'movie moments'. It is not until the end of the play when the family is celebrating her graduation from high school that Ernestine lets out all her opinions that she has on how things are run in the house hold.

The 1950s in America was a difficult time for African Americans, as the Crumps would soon find out. Throughout the play Ernestine struggles with her feelings toward her family, father, and her surroundings. In the first Act, Ernestine's Aunt Lily (her deceased mother's sister) comes to live with them. Aunt Lily, as part of an underground communist party, has spent much more time in the North facing racist ideals and living a wild feminist driven life in the city. Although Lily has set her cap for Ernestine's father, Mr. Crump, she is foiled when he runs off for three days and elopes with a woman he meets on the subway. Mr. Crump, grief stricken, has latched on to the religious Father Divine and his teachings to numb the pain, going so far as to eventually marry Gerta, a white German immigrant (Kentucky Educational Television). This causes countless issues for the family.

The marriage causes much strife in the Crump household. With a disgruntled Aunt Lily and a new white woman staying in the same house, Ernestine must stand by and watch her

family fight and struggle against cultural misunderstandings and racist America. Marriage between a Black man and a white woman of this time would have been more than frowned upon; in the play, the couple is met with harsh opposition. The situation reaches a boiling point when Mr. Crump returns home injured after having taken Gerta, his new wife, to the cinema. They had been attacked on the street for being seen together. The sight of a Black male with a white woman was particularly offensive to people at this time.

Family, similar to any culture, is very important in Black culture. Ernestine has to take care of the household and her younger sister, Ermina. The given circumstances of her mother's death and the relocation of her family directly affect Ernestine in a restricting way. As the oldest daughter she feels responsible for her younger sister; she takes on a leadership role in the household of preparing dinner, sewing, cleaning up, and making sure her sister has everything she needs. She chooses to step up to this role, because there is no-one else to do so. Her father is unable to handle the role of successfully caring after the girls, while dealing with his own grief.

Another given circumstance is Ernestine's family moving from Florida to New York City. Ernestine has to deal with herself and her sister being made fun of for being "country". She is not your classic born and bred New Yorker. She's not used to many of the things in the city, or how things are run in the city. This is specifically evident in her education. Although she was originally from the south and thus hindered in her education, the circumstances of being up north where Blacks were allowed to get a higher education aided Ernestine in her goals. Academically Ernestine went as far as she could go in school in the south, being that there were no colleges that she would be able to attend. In reality moving north did help her to achieve her dream of going to college. The play begins in the middle of her senior year with the end of the play set at her graduation party.

Being perceived as country also set the sisters apart at school socially. In one scene Ernestine addresses the audience describing a situation where the girls at school made fun of them for the type of clothes they wore and the style of their hair. This causes Ermina, to retaliate and fight back. In response to these issues Ernestine comforts Ermina, again taking on the mother role.

Additionally, the economic standing of the family plays a large role in this play. Simply put, Ernestine's family is very poor. Since her father works the late shift at the bread factory he doesn't get to spend time with the girls that often. Because of the lack of money Ernestine and Ermina later steal lace from a sewing store because they can't afford to buy it. The lace is for the white dress that she is making for her graduation.

Lynn Nottage had this to say about her play:

At the time I was interested in the period of the 1950s. It was a moment in American history in which I felt so much change. It was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Music was going through this explosion. You had be-bop, rock 'n' roll—so much that was going on. This was such a volatile and rich period. Yet everything I had seen was in Black and white. And I wanted to make it colorful. So I started writing *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* to try to understand that era. I learned that it is like the period we live in now. It is complicated. People's lives were their lives, regardless of what was going on. I think that is what I was trying to capture—that all these things were going on outside the Crump family household. They still had to figure the same things, to figure out how to stay a happy family. And *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* is about a displaced Southern family smack in the center of New York City, in the 1950s, trying to

cope with those changes. Coping with integration, trying to cope with big-city ideals with a small-town sensibility (Kentucky Educational Television).

At the end of the play, Ernestine delivers a monologue essentially providing a look into the future of each of the characters. Ernestine does go to college and has a family with two sons. Ermina ultimately drops out of school because she gets pregnant early. Aunt Lily dies from drug use. This gives us a good look at African American expectations of this time.

Part 2 Black British Theatre: A Common History

Britain has had a longstanding history with theatre and in many minds it is the birth place of the modern form of theatre that is most viewed today. Richard Eyre said:

There is something about Britain that smells of the theatre, which has spread to every country where theatre exists...The British Theatre has inspired Pushkin and Goethe, Chekhov and Schiller, Ibsen, Eugene O’Neil, Mamet, Stanislavsky and Brecht – as well as legions of visitors to the country who cite the theatre as one of the principal reasons for coming to Britain (Eyre 11).

Indicating the importance of theatre in the life and breath of English culture.

Compared to the United States, Great Britain has been practicing theatre hundreds of years earlier. The first plays produced in America were imported from England; the writing, style and formation were carried over with colonization from Britain. It wasn’t until years later that Americans started to write their own stylized version of theatre. Accordingly, the representation of race and color difference was first addressed on the English stage. “Representation of ‘them’ – the ‘Other’ - has a long history in British theatre, linking to shifting notions of who constitutes ‘us’. The portrayal of the non-white ‘Other’ is a central strand of this history, a strand frequently

associated with the use of the colour black” (Chambers 10). The ‘Other’ has become nearly synonymous with Black or colored. In British culture today ‘Black’ with a capital ‘B’ represents any and all groups that are colored or non-white, including Asian and Indian peoples; while ‘black’ with a lower case ‘b’ represents people of African or Afro-Caribbean origins. All the ‘Other’ or outside groups are lumped into one category sharing a name that does not describe them culturally or ethnically. As far as my paper is concerned ‘Black’ British is only in reference to Blacks in Britain of African or Afro-Caribbean origins.

The Black ‘Other’ has always held a particular connotation in Britain. People were more easily recognized as different simply by the color of their skin. Chambers comments:

Colour was not always the chief index of difference, but its role is fundamental and deep-rooted. Blackening the face, for instance appears to have been common in medieval village life, from poaching and protest to seasonal activities such as plough-witching and pace-egging. Although Morris dancing probably took its name from the Moors (African race) and some dancers wore blackface, whether, or in what ways, the early history of popular blackface practice is connected to people of African or Asian descent is not clear (Chambers 10).

Black face though largely banned from the stage and screen is still seen in some performance aspects today. For example dramatic presentation or pageants at Christmas time hold the Dutch tradition of ‘Black Pete’. Who is a small almost elf-like black character seen helping Santa. Black Pete follows Santa around carrying things for him and answering to him like a slave. Today there are still reenactments held where white traditionalists dress-up as Black Pete by darkening their faces.

One of the greatest known playwrights in history, William Shakespeare, was an Englishman. He was also the first English playwright to include a black presence on a predominately white stage. Black performers have been seen since Shakespeare's time in the European world. There were many court performers and court entertainers brought into European kingdoms. These performers presented all different kinds of arts, including dance, theatre, and every kind of music. Though black performers have been a part of British entertainment for a long time, Black British Theatre, on the periphery, did not begin shaping their own brand of theatre until the 20th Century. Unlike African American playwrights, Black British playwrights did not begin producing original work until the late 1900s.

Shakespeare wrote the first distinct roles indicating people of color in England. The most famous of these were seen in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Tempest*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. *Othello*, written in 1604, uniquely, is one of the only plays from that time that features a leading black male role. These roles, although depicting black or dark skinned characters were played by white actors, wearing blackface. "The theatrical use of blackface and related body decoration has to be interpreted both only in terms of social context, as part of the parade of blackness on display at a given moment in a given society (in paintings, literature, or fashion, for instance) but in terms of the complete vocabulary of theatrical signification employed at any one time, itself a highly intricate often contradictory, and competing set of codes, inconsistently practiced" (Chambers 11).

"*Othello* holds a central place as the most important portrait of the racialized 'Other' until the twentieth century and even in the twenty-first century; the play cannot be read without race being critical. Whether 'Other' is black or brown, whether he represents a particular ethnicity or

is an imagined amalgam, he is the ‘Other’, and he is commonly both darker than other protagonists and the only character of his skin color on stage” (Chambers 16).

Othello is directly related with the representation of the ‘Other’ in Shakespearean Theatre. Both Othello and the Moroccan Prince from *The Merchant of Venice* (whose dark skin is pointed out by Portia), hold positions of power and leadership, completely contradictory to how most Blacks were regarded in that time. Although the Moroccan Prince is a minor role character, Othello pushes cultural boundaries of acceptance simply by being the protagonist or hero of the story, though undoubtedly a tragic one.

Othello is not however stagnant. “What Othello represents and how he is seen, along with his race, have changed over subsequent centuries. Until the second half of the twentieth century, Othello was generally taken as an example of the stereotype Shakespeare was trying to avoid” (Chambers 17). Slavery served as a complication by accentuating the negative perception of blackness, it was often hard for audiences to see black Othello as tragic. On stage, “to resolve the tension between his nobility and his blackness, white actors tended to make him brown or emphasize his distinctive, particular individuality” (Chambers 17). Slavery complicated the situation. Othello by virtue of his position was regarded differently. Slaves were often thought of as inferior, Othello defies this idea as his intellect and leadership abilities identify him as being equivalent is not superior to his white counter parts.

Chambers explains, in his book *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History*, the view that many had of Othello in the 20th century, as white actors to played this iconic role:

Sometimes, he (Othello) might even be almost English. Othello became one of the leading roles for a white actor to play, in some degree because its blackface demands presented an extra mimetic challenge. For black actors, the role was presented as a

pinnacle, too – though this centrality brought its own problems and has been disputed – yet it was only toward the end of the twentieth century that it became unacceptable for white actors to play the part (Chambers 17).

In the mid – 20th century, Othello was notably performed by an extremely well-known white British actor, Laurence Olivier. He was the first Artistic Director of the National Theatre opening in 1963. In their first season he starred in Othello, directed by John Dexter. “His performance was the apotheosis of his acting process – working from the outside in an act of mimicry from an actor in love with making up and dressing up; he blackened his skin, lowered his voice, curled his lip, rolled his eyes and prowled the stage like a giant cat” (Eyre & Wright 43).

In one comment made about his process in becoming Othello, Olivier said “I had to be black. I had to feel black down to my soul. I had to look out from a black man’s world. Not one of repression, for Othello would have felt superior to the white man. If I peeled my skin, underneath would be another level of black skin. I was to be beautiful. Quite beautiful” (Eyre 43). Olivier’s approach to Othello was unique but ultimately could not change that fact that in was not a Black man playing the role, but the portrayal of what ‘Black’ looked like from an outside source. Shakespeare was the first English playwright to dig into the racial/color issue that many still discuss today.

At present race and color are discussed in larger arenas with greater cultural influences. African Influence on Black British theatre today is substantially more direct than that in the American Black arts arena. To understand modern black culture in the U.K. one must grasp the relationship between Britain and Africa historically. This would be the three great sins that England has committed against Africa since its first encounters with African peoples as a whole.

The first of which is ‘Slavery’, which has been discussed in part one with African American history. The second is ‘Colonization’, which is unique to that of England the imperialist Great British Empire. The third and final sin would be ‘Immigration’ or rather the focus on the Mistreatment of Black British Immigrants even today.

Slavery

Even though England abolished slavery before the U.S., in 1833, it still perpetuated slavery mainly by supporting slave trade to others throughout the 1800s. British merchants and ships were often used to transport slaves to the Americas. In addition to their involvement in the slave trade, the mistreatment of black people was prevalent in English society. The English were enslaving people long before the United States was even established as a country back throughout the Roman times.

Great Britain started an international movement to out-law the slave trade through several treaties; including Convention of Saint-Germain-en-Laye of 1919, which provided for the total abolition of slavery and slave trade on the land and sea; 1926 Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade; 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. The three Conventions stated above all worked to furnish the core legal rules that prohibit slavery in contemporary international affairs. “Slavery does not threaten world peace, nor is it necessary transnational in character, yet slavery shocks the conscience of the world community” (Joyner 136). The actions made by Britain in the 1900s formed the position have Blacks are able to hold today free of enslavement, and free to express their art. One thing that slavery has always been guided by is difference in color.

Color has been and continues to be important in British society. Chambers says:

As the colonial enterprise expanded, particularly through the African slave trade, there was an increasing concern to differentiate ruler and ruled by colour. Although colour was never the sole or an unambiguous indicator of difference, it came to replace categories such as religion, which had previously held sway in the hierarchy of racialization, and developed its own refinements (however uncertain) of pigment grading. Pure (racially speaking) white came on top and black at the bottom with ludicrous gradations between, from mulatto (one black, one white parent) to quadroon (one-fourth African) to octoroon (one-eighth African) and so forth. Just as masculinity had reached a stage of being the gender norm whereby it was unconsciously accepted and therefore did not need to be constantly present or acknowledged as such, whiteness and its cultural correlatives, whether explicitly states or not, became regarded by the British as the universal benchmark against which other virtues were to be judged. This uneven process was under way in the Restoration period but did not reach maturity until the nineteenth century (Chambers 21).

Colonization

As if prolonging slavery wasn't enough, Britain maintained colonies in Africa well into the 20th century. English colonization was especially strong in the Caribbean. African countries that suffered for British rule included; The Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, Nyasaland which is modern Malawi, Sierra Leone, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, which is modern Zambia just to name a few (Luscombe). Colonization is the economic, political and social control of a nation over a dependent country, territory or people. It also refers to the governing influence of one nation over a dependent people--influences that may, to a greater or

lesser degree, impact the dependent population's religion, language and culture. Imperialism is often used synonymously with colonialism, but can also be more broadly used to describe a situation in which one nation seeks to extend its power, influence and authority over other (not entirely dependent) peoples without actually invading or displacing them.

Just like slavery, colonization was an economic act, but other reasons were put forward to explain and justify it, to both the colonized and the colonizer. Europe's obdurate image of Africa had been formed accounts of travelers and the slave traders themselves, and this image was reinforced effectively and became entrenched during the colonial era (Okagbue 15).

Over-simplifications, generalizations, and value judgments are common in our society today, whether correct or incorrect. They are often false, one sided portrayals of people, cultures, or people groups. They affect not only how one is viewed by others but also how one can come to view individuals and cultural groups around them. For example, many have a single story of Africa and what it was like to live there and don't understand, or see the real, or rather whole story of Africa. Many only see the story told by the media; that of starved children in extreme poverty, adults with AIDS, and of a poor war torn continent. Because of this story this story many people have no idea that English is the national first language in several African nations today. This single story of Africa is not all inclusive of Africa as a whole, there is indeed poverty and AIDS in Africa, yes. But there are also thriving metropolises, with strong modern communities, and well-educated peoples that rival development in western culture. Many fall into the habit of viewing others through a single lens, in which the small things that they hear repetitively about them are the only things they can later, incorrectly, generalize the group as.

Often those with power in a society define everyone else within it. If a certain group holds all the economic power within a community, subsequently they control the media as well, ultimately dictating what story is told to others. At times a whole society's history can be displaced when their story is told solely from the perspective of the dominant group. A story often emerges as one sided if the story of the lesser group is presented second. For example, telling the story of American history starting with Christopher Columbus and 'secondly' introducing the American Indians only in relation to their interactions with white colonists suggests that the Native Americans story bears a lesser impact than that of Christopher Columbus. This can be corrected by telling the story of the Native Americans, who are actually indigenous to America, before introducing the white colonist, who ironically claim to have discovered the land that the Native Americans had inhabited for generations.

It is important to remember that there are many stories or histories that shape societies, not just a single story. Just as there is more than one story to a single individual there is more than one story to others as well. A single story creates a stereotype of cultural groups generally to the detriment of that group. This has been especially true in theatre. For decades, theatre has been produced by the dominant groups of society only allowing what they deem appropriate to be presented to the public. In a play, the 'master narrative' refers to events as told from the perspective of those in power. Often stories were told from the perspective of the dominant group with the belittlement of the lesser group. This became a great issue with slavery and later colonization. "What the slave owners attacked was the slaves' personalities, their total concept and images of themselves as men and women" (Okagbue 21).

How one views the self is influenced by how others view you. For the Black man this has been a negative portrayal for a long time; especially in play construction.

When one focuses attention on the self what one usually encounters is the 'me'. So, when the slave or colonized native looked at himself, what he saw only the object 'me' which corresponded to a negative and powerless individual. And this was the image that confronted the child as he or she began to construct his or her identity as part of the rituals of infancy. Every child wants a hero for a father, but the slave and colonial environments left no such heroes to satisfy the longing in the children of slaves and colonized peoples. The latter therefore sought their heroes elsewhere, and of course there were imperial colonial and slave literature to provide them with numerous white hero as whose heroisms were achieved at the expense of black villains, devils and monsters. And because the child did not like the non-heroic portraits of the fathers and mothers, he began to identify with the 'other' who was heroic, just as their parent after a while had begun to imitate the oppressed (slaves and colonized peoples) to escape through imitation or 'mimicry' is responsible for the curious identification of the oppressed with the oppressor (Okagbue 23-4).

Until recent years, master narratives have dominated the stage. A recent development has been the wide spread wave of counter-narratives erupting on the scene. Master narratives are told from the perspective of the majority group in a society, often portraying marginalized minority roles. Minority populations often learn of their perceived cultural identity within the mainstream based on these narrow minority portrayals. In comparison to the master narrative, the counter-narrative is one that offers an alternative perspective on the same events. Typically, the counter narrative involves some kind of critical examination and re-imagining of the events. Post-Colonial plays are a perfect demonstration of this. They often display the narrative of the

colonized group or the mistreated minority group allowing the minority population to accurately display their cultural identities and understandings.

Plot lines in post-colonial plays focus on the adjustment of one cultural group and families in new countries under different rule of law. The intent behind the study of Post-Colonial Theatre is to draw conclusions about culture through play text as representations of peoples after historical events have occurred. It confronts the viewer with something of great interest: the movement and reception of great numbers of people on an international level, also known as immigration. This is often achieved through plays that involve encounters between colonist and the colonized. Encounters of culture are interactions with other people that are affected by the implied understanding of status, authority, race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Colonial encounters usually indicate an imbalance in status between two or more people or uncertainty about what power relations are at play.

The colonial encounters most relevant to Black British Theatre most often involve the English controlled portions of Africa. For example, Great Britain held power over Nigeria for over 100 years. The end of Britain's rule in Africa started Nigeria's independence in 1960. Despite the newly liberated country's hopes and optimism about the future, Nigeria was soon over run by corrupt leaders and government officials. Wole Soyinka, a Black British playwright used this as one of the reasons he decided to write plays with political statements simply because he was appalled by the corrupt realities in his own country.

There were many troubles in the newly independent Nigeria. Some people even requested a return of foreign powers so that the state could run smoothly. It was thought that many of the chiefs held too much power in their regions and used it more for themselves than others. Though

much of the corruption was present before independence and simply became a larger issue after Nigeria gained independence (Death and the King's Horseman).

Behind almost every corrupt government the cause is usually a corrupt political leader being bribed or swayed greatly by economic factors. Nigeria not only struggled with a weak government but also had an economic crisis on its hands. In the years after Nigeria's independence, the country struggled greatly economically and even if it hadn't had a corrupt government it still would have seen some extraordinarily hard times.

The Black playwright Wole Soyinka lived through and wrote about his experiences in decolonized Nigeria and his later immigration into England. On July 13, 1934, Soyinka was born in western Nigeria in a town called Ijebu Isara. His childhood was very different from that of the children around him. Being raised in Nigeria he was exposed to Yoruba culture and had several relatives who practiced African beliefs, but his parents raised him as a Christian. During his childhood, Nigeria was still a colony of Great Britain. In 1954 Soyinka left Nigeria to attend the University of Leeds, in England. "After graduation he joined London's Royal Court Theatre as a script-reader and then as a writer, and produced his first play, *The Swamp Dwellers*, there in 1959" (Death and the King's Horseman).

In 1960 Nigeria became independent of Great Britain and Soyinka returned home to work with other Nigerian playwrights. He traveled all across Nigeria to record as much Yoruba culture as possible so that he could translate it into relevant theatre. The majority of his early works contained a great deal of Yoruba cultural influence including dance, music, poetry, and art, all with a direct theme or sub-text related to Nigeria breaking free of Western influence and power. Although Nigeria had achieved its independence it was still a very troubled nation with a very corrupt government. Wole Soyinka was arrested twice when he criticized the government

ultimately landing him in prison for two years after which much of his work took on more political views, criticizing the new government and stating Soyinka's views on corruption in Nigeria.

Death and the King's Horseman, written in 1975, has been viewed as one of Wole Soyinka's best plays. *Death and the King's Horseman* is an historical tragedy in five acts, with Yoruba influences. It takes place in 1946, in Oyo, an Ancient Yoruba city in Nigeria. Major characters include; Elesin, Mr. & Mrs. Pilkings, Praise-singer, and Olunde. Iyaloja, and Amusa, The story starts in a Nigerian town because of the death of a local Chief; it has been 30 days since his death and now as per ritual his 'horseman' or closest advisor must also die to accompany him to the afterlife. The 'horseman' also known as Elesin goes outside of tradition and demands a young bride before his death. The story is complicated by local British District Official trying to stop the supposed barbaric suicide tradition while openly mocking Yoruba religious culture. *Death and the King's Horseman* is a unique tale about the effects of colonization, conflicting traditions, cultural misunderstands, religion and the transition from life to death

The play *Death and the King's Horseman* was one of the plays written after his imprisonment, published in 1975. In it Soyinka discusses colonization and he also uses it to "examine weaknesses in Nigerian society as a whole, caused by individuals forgetting their traditions, their culture, and their duty to themselves and to each other...After his prison experiences, his work became more political and more strident. In many of his newer plays, he turned his critical gaze away from British colonialism and toward corrupt African leaders. Other plays, including *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), examine weaknesses in Nigerian society as a whole," (*Death and the King's Horseman* 2001). In the play, Elesin is unable to

complete the death ceremony not because of colonial interference but out of his own short comings. *Death and the King's Horseman* was based on an actual event in southwest Nigeria where a ritual suicide was interrupted by British colony officials. The play runs slightly different than the actual event including a wedding on the last day of Elesin's life along with the suicide.

Much of Wole Soyinka's life was a direct influence on this play and how it was written. I already mentioned how Soyinka was surrounded with Yoruba culture at an early age but what exactly does that mean. Yoruba arts are a very unique and colorful culture that is hard for western cultures to grasp. In much of African performance music plays a key role in the production. Drums themselves are heavily relied upon. In *Death and the King's Horseman* the drums are played non-stop until the time where Elesin is supposed to die. There are different technical rhymes used for separate ceremonies but in this play we see the wedding ceremony combined with the ritual death. Along with music and drums, dance is also a widely used African performance technique. Yoruba dance is very specific and played a direct role in this show, especially in the opening village scene when Elesin is first presented by the praise-singer.

Oral tradition is a very important technique used in Yoruba rituals and culture. Soyinka traveled for a long period of time trying to take in as much Yoruba oral tradition as possible. For example:

Yoruba peoples of southwestern Nigeria conceive of rituals as journeys -- sometimes actual, sometimes virtual. Performed as a parade or a procession, a pilgrimage, a masking display, or possession trance, the journey evokes the reflexive, progressive, transformative experience of ritual participation. Yoruba Ritual is an original and provocative study of these practices. Using a performance paradigm, Margaret Thompson Drewal forges a new theoretical and methodological approach to the study of ritual that is

thoroughly grounded in close analysis of the thoughts and actions of the participants.

Challenging traditional notions of ritual as rigid, stereotypic, and invariant, Drewal reveals ritual to be progressive, transformative, generative, and reflexive and replete with simultaneity, multimodality, contingency, indeterminacy, and intertextuality (Drewal Thompson).

All Yoruba performers play some role in ceremony. Despite drumming, dancing and art being an artistic forum in Yoruba culture they are also used in spiritual rituals. These spiritual connections are often times intertwined with any performance of these arts. Bole Omojola, discusses this very issue in *Rhythms of Gods: Music and Spirituality in Yoruba Culture* an article in the Journal of Pan African Studies:

The constant engagement between the elements of play and spirituality in Yoruba performance provides the setting for understanding the role of the Yoruba performer as a mediator between temporal and spiritual domains of existence. Yoruba masquerade performances are particularly illustrative of such mediatory roles. The masker, usually a male, physically relates to the human audiences who follow, tease, praise, observe, and perform with him. He must also relate to the divine presence of the ancestral forces that he embodies. The masker, just like the drummer, or the singer, performs within religious rituals, thereby navigating a balance between the two different modes of experience that he connects. For while, on the one hand, he must deal with esoteric narratives and age-long rituals that communicate directly with deities, he must, on the other hand, also respond and relate to the social situations within which religious rituals derive meaning in real life terms (Omojola).

I am going to examine this play in a few key points. I will examine this play through the context that, “A whole or complete sense of self is not characteristic of the colonized subject although it is sometimes the utopian goal of bodies/cultures inevitably fractured by western imperialism” (Gilbert and Tompkins). I will focus on one main part of the above thought for this paper, how the lack of “whole or complete sense of self” affects it’s of colonized subjects. This is important because it shows the damage that the colonizer has done to the colonized. Presumably before the colonizer entered the area and took control, the colonized had a “whole or complete sense of self”. It wasn’t until after they had dealt with someone having power over them that they lost that sense, whether seen culturally, personally, spiritually, or physically. One way or another that society is forever changed by colonization and their sense of self is either completely broken or severely damaged.

In the play *Death and the King’s Horseman* things worked a bit differently. In this play you have a man upon whose fate the whole society relies. When he fails the only way that it can be set right is if his son takes his place and performed the act himself, which he ultimately he does. I would argue that both of these acts, that of the father Elesin and the son Olunde, were acts made by fractured men, broken by colonization with a lost sense of self.

When Elesin kills him-self at the end of the play his whole sense of self is gone, broken beyond belief. He does it not for any ritualistic purpose but merely because he has lost everything, and would have nothing left. Before Pilkings orders the ceremony to be interrupted, Elesin seemed to have a complete sense of self. He knew who he was and what he wanted. He knew his duty and was mostly ready to fulfill it. But when he was unable to cross over at the interruption of the colonizer he lost that sense of self, especially when he was put in prison. The

last straw seems to be the news of his son's death. His son who traditionally would have taken up his position upon his death killed him-self for the good of the community.

Olunde had an internal struggle with his own sense of self. In his culture he would be the next in line for his father's position. He was considered a very important man in the community and yet he went away to school in England. The Pilkings, having supported him, thought that they were doing Olunde a favor separating him from his home, family and community. In his relation with his father Olunde struggles. At first he condemns Elesin but then he seeks forgiveness. Based on the struggle that Olunde has with his father upon his return we see that all is not well in Olunde's sense of self nor is the whole as it had once been. These factors I think point to a fractured sense of self where Olunde is trying to come to terms with his Yoruba communal responsibilities, his recent English education and his own personal views.

When Mrs. Pilkings tries to talk to Olunde about race and the world he has some very definite opinions that she simply refuses to listen to or even consider. It is clear that he now has a better understanding of the English culture than she does being an out-side observer. He is educated and can use his knowledge to form well thought out arguments. In one scene Olunde says to Mrs. Pilkings "You have no respect for what you don't understand". In one article the character of Olunde is discussed as being caught in the cross fire between rival traditions (Billington).

Olunde's sense of self has been broken and is fractured with many different and competing viewpoints. The competing elements in Olunde's identity stem mostly from his cultural background, his communities expectations, his father's role, and his English education. The most interesting female character in the play to me was the Young Bride that Elesin decides to marry before his death. The Young Bride has no lines throughout the entire script even when

her marriage to Elesin causes unease in the community, she speaks not one word. In the play the women play large and vocal roles making it very interesting that Young Bribe who is so crucial to the plot of the story gets no say in it. Yet one can clearly see the women of the town present her to Elesin despite the fact that she is engaged to his son. The Young Bride is never asked her opinion on marrying Elesin nor is the audience given any insight into her relationship with Olunde or if she had any feelings for him. The wife's position in Nigerian Society is of great interest. She is to "be seen and not heard" which Elesin perfectly demonstrates on pg. 66 when he says to Jane "That is my wife sitting down there. You notice how still and silent she sits? My business is with your husband." The cultural differences are never more apparent in regards to women then at this point.

Amusa is another broken character affected by colonization. Amusa is a minor character that is seen infrequently but seems to suffer a great deal from a lost sense of wholeness or fractured self. When the Pilkings are wearing the death garb we see him try to warn them against it, then he simply looks away as he tries desperately to hold on to that part of his self that respects and somewhat fears the religious traditions of others. On the other hand he has bowed down to the imperialistic colonizer in that he works for them and must do as they say. Ultimately although he doesn't die at the end, like Elesin and Olunde, he is fired from his position. In in this play the sense of self is broken in several men including both father and son the consequence of which was death. Death in this play was felt on a communal level, causing a direct effect on the wellbeing of the entire community.

Death and the King's Horseman, has been performed several times in the last two decades, indicating a revival of sorts for Soyinka's compelling tale. The first was at the Washington Shakespeare Company in DC. In 2006, it was directed by John Vreeke. The show

was a struggle for many reasons, for one the company's typical low budget and bare bones style of production was difficult to fully represent the rich Yoruba culture presented in Soyinka's play. Despite these challenges the Washington Shakespeare Company used a multitude of techniques to provide context.

Director John Vreeke has devised a sweeping production that unfolds in unexpected ways on Misha Kachman's bare set. Mr. Kachman uses the entirety of WSC's staging area and has adorned its floor with African designs and added two raised dais. Brooke Kidd's choreography takes advantage of the space to create the African dances that permeate the play. And Ayun Fedorcha's lighting adds nuances to the actor's performances, while Erik Trester's projections produce an interesting special effect (Talcott).

Though the play was a challenge Vreeke persevered with the knowledge to he was presenting this distinctly non-western play to a western audience. This show included many complicated themes that are difficult for westerners to grasp. Vreeke echoes Soyinka's own statements on the play when he puts it in a different perspective: "It would have been devastating to Christians if Jesus had said, 'You know what? I'm not getting up on the cross.'" Director Vreeke comments on the culture clash that happens when a western audience views a foreign production. *Death and the King's Horseman* explored culture, religion, colonization and their interaction with each other.

The second contrasting performance in 2009 was presented in the National Theatre in London. This show was very interesting in regards to artistic vision. In this showing of *Death and the King's Horseman* the whole cast was black and the characters that were white were played by black actors 'white' washed. The play its self is a difficult pill to swallow for westerners.

Even more disturbingly, Soyinka asks us to look beyond our rational distrust of ceremonial suicide. This is tough stuff for a materialist British audience to take on board. But, in a stroke of radical daring, Norris makes it easier by presenting the play with an all-black cast that 'whites' up to play the colonialists. This is a classic piece of Brechtian alienation that forces us to examine the issues at stake. It also yields moments of startling comedy. To see Lucian Msamati and Jenny Jules as the Pilkings posing as upper class imperialists is initially as hilarious as watching a group of Yoruba women mimicking the British habit of crossing and uncrossing their legs (Billington).

Having discussed the relevance of white actors wearing 'black face' and the ban on minstrel, viewing black actors in 'white face' was a bold choice to use on a British stage, particularly in the very country that colonized Nigeria and triggered do many of the problems demonstrated in the play. Not only is it presented for the country that colonized but for a mainly white audience. Culture cues were then taken to an extreme with the audience feeling even more of the alienation of the colonizers in the play.

Immigration

A great deal of the United Kingdom's cultural make-up has been established through the immigration and the settling of foreign peoples in England. Throughout English history there has been wave after wave of immigrants arriving and settling in Britain. Nearly all newcomers went through a phase of dislike, disapproval and prejudicial discrimination from the English natives. Black immigrants especially faced this issue. African and African-Caribbean immigrants, post WWII, suffered great mistreatment in Britain; including segregation, discrimination, with little to no say in society or rights in British government. The biggest issue face by Black immigrants was identity. Second generation Black British children sought to distance themselves from their

parent's African identities and simply be recognized as British. Not only were they considered socially inferior, but many were treated worse simply because of their visibly darker skin.

Black immigrants settled and tried to build a life in Britain despite social inequalities. The simple fact that black people were permitted to immigrate to Britain, puts it at odds with how the majority of Blacks settled in America. Black British culture grew primarily out of immigrants, not former slaves, as seen in Wole Soyinka's case. This difference clarifies a distinctive split in the type of theatre produced by Black British playwrights. This distinction is found in those that either emigrated directly from Africa (sometime during adulthood), and those that either immigrated as children or were born in Britain, from parents who immigrated.

First and second generation immigrants came to live in and experience different cultural realities. African parents still very aware of their African heritage brought with them many specific African practices and understandings of identity. Second generation persons, conversely experienced more mixed identities. One half was provided by their parent's African heritage and the other by the English world around them. One such individual is the playwright, Wole Soyinka. Both Black British Theatre and African American Theatre have distinct roots in African Theatre. Since the 1500s English theatre and performance has been influenced in some way by the African Arts.

It was in the 1930s that Black theatre and political activism were being established in the in Britain, launchings itself off of the platform that the Harlem Renaissance created in America.

However, it was immigration from the Caribbean and South Asia in the late 1950s and early 1960s that saw a wave of Caribbean writers for the stage. "Errol John won an Observer prize for *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, which was staged at the Royal Court in 1958" (Black & Asian Performance in Britain 1940-1969).

It was a struggle to establish a black presence on the British stage, especially from 1940 to 1970. Several black theatre companies started-up only to crash and dissolved within less than a year of beginning. A few examples being:

The Negro Repertory Theatre (established 1944), The Negro Theatre Company (1948), the West Indian Drama Group (1956), New Day Theatre Company (1960), New Negro Theatre Company (1960), The Ira Aldridge Players (1961), Negro Theatre Workshop (1961), the Pan-African Players (1966) mostly lasted for one or two productions before folding (Williams).

Despite the struggle of Black British theatre group, a few Black British playwrights were able to produce successful and popular works. “Barry Reckord was the first of a new wave of Black British playwrights to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s. His play *Della* was performed at the Theatre Centre in 1954 and was revived, under the title *Flesh to a Tiger*, at the Royal Court in 1958. Skyvers, his best known work, has been frequently revived, most recently on BBC Radio in December 2011, only a week before Reckord died” (Williams). In addition to Reckord, two other Black British playwrights made a great impact during this time. Errol John and Wole Soyinka. Errol John’s *Moon on a Rainbow* was staged at the Royal Court in 1958, after it won an Observer play competitions (Williams). Wole Soyinka was a key figure in the early days of the court. He helped create an innovative documentary style play about British colonial atrocities in *Nigeria Eleven Dead at Holo Camp* (1959). Barry Reckord, Errol John, and Wole Soyinka were all first-generation immigrants, from Jamaica, Trinidad and Nigeria, respectively.

In the 20th century the number of Blacks in Britain increased dramatically. “It has been estimated that in 1931 there were 137,000 (Black British) people in the UK who had been born the Commonwealth. By 1951, that figure was 218,000, by 1961 it was 541,000, and by 1971

1,140,000” (Williams). The rapid expansion of the Black British population was often met with hostility, some of which was seen in the race riots in 1958, in Notting Hill and “the racist murder of Antiguan migrant Kelso Cochrane in Notting Hill the following year” (Williams). These race riots reflected the social and political conflict which was happening in the United States, much of which was sparked in response to the Civil Rights Movement in America.

Unlike the U.S., Black Arts in Britain did not flourish for a long time. Indeed, African American Theatre made waves in British Theatre before Black British Theatre really arose.

In the 1940s and ‘50s Britain borrowed from American theatre energy, a voracious appetite for passionate language used within unembarrassed enthusiasm, and an ambition to make theatre worth bothering about. For all the commercialism of Broadway, the British theatre gained something that seemed to have been lost; the New World gave life to the old (Eyre & Wright 13).

African American Theatre in comparison, though constantly held back, has been at least recognized within the American society. Black British Theatre is constantly seen as a community arts program; not to the level or standard of professional theatre. Out of the hardship Blacks faced in Britain, the Black British population built communities to support each other.

Due to the way that British society functions the role that Black British Theatre plays is regarded quite differently than that of African American Theatre. For instance black arts in Britain are mostly ignored as compared to other groups. For the most part, it has not only been under rated, but also under funded and altogether thought of as not real or professional theatre art form. “Indeed, what became clear in the 1980s that Black theatre was mainly treated by funding bodies as an off-shoot of the political phenomenon of immigrant settlement...while mainstream white theatre could aspire to be art, Black theatre could only ever be social work.

Understandably, many Black theatre makers were frustrated to be confined in this way” (Williams). Despite the achievements of a select few Black British theatres from its beginning was labeled Community Theatre.

Community Theatre is theatre built in and around the societies surrounding it, usually focused on issues within that society and used as a source of entertainment to those that reside in that community. Winsome Pinnock, a Black British playwright thought that placing the responsibility to communicate the racial complexity of British life by relying only on the writings of Black British playwrights would create a distorted or single story of the British landscape and the way it is viewed. Pinnock had this to say, “Every play by a black playwright, whether or not issues of race and identity are its subject, is weighted with the absence of other plays, the absence of other playwrights. The play becomes representative.” Artistic Director Alby James insisted: “I wanted Temba to gain national status. I didn’t want to stand around in community halls” (Williams). Black British Theatre has grown out of the works of Black British communities, containing its growth and achievements to only that of the betterment of that particular community, however, this is a confining and restrictive description. It does not recognize Black British Theatre on a national level, which is detrimental to the black arts.

It wasn’t until the 1980s that things began to change on the black arts scene in Britain. The 80s brought a fresh wave of thought and all new Black British playwrights; “Including Caryl Phillips, Michael Ellis, Jacqueline Rudet, Winsome Pinnock, Tunde Ikoli, Nigel Moffatt, Trish Cooke, and Jenny McLeod. Some writers, like Pinnock and McLeod, initially wanted to reject the label ‘Black playwright’ with all the ghettoizing that it implied” (Williams). These Black playwrights had a lot of things standing in their way as well as road blocks to work through.

Joan-Ann Maynard though not a Black British playwright or director has had substantial experience producing Black theatre. She has been Artistic Director of the highly-respected Black Theatre Co-Op, which has been producing plays from the Black perspective for 15 years, as well as being the Chair of the Black Theatre Forum (Maynard 53-54). Some of the roadblocks that Maynard and her associates have encountered are very different than what a traditional non-Black British playwright might face. For example the selection of plays is a struggle. “The selection of a play for production by a black British writer is problematic, because of the unavailability of text, even of plays that have received critical acclaim. There is no natural progression from production to text as is often the case with plays by mainstream white playwrights, though this may be primarily due to market forces” (Maynard 54-55).

The turn of the century brought with it another generation of Black British playwrights, many reaching a higher level of cultural prominence than those before them. One of which was Michael McMillan, a published playwright and the previous Artistic Director of Double Edge Theatre Company. McMillan explained, how his personal writing style reflected the influences around him, including African American theatre:

I have been inspired in a local and diasporic sense by Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and the works of Edgar White, such as *The Nine Night*, George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum*, and Amain Napthali’s *Raggamuffin*, among many others. Yet Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* forms part of my eclectic appropriation as well as the critical theories of Brecht, Eisenstein, and a range of performance or live art, visual arts, film and TV (McMillan 58-59).

Three other well know Black playwrights of this time are Roy Williams, Debbie Tucker Green and Kwame Kwei-Armah. Roy Williams was the first Black British playwright to have a

play performed at the National Theatre Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company. He is a fourth generation Black British immigrant, with nearly 20 plays under his belt, the most recent being *Sucker Punch* (2010). In 2003, Debbie Tucker Green “came to sudden prominence with near-simultaneous premieres of *Born Bad* and *Dirty Butterfly*, which established her as a radical new voice in British playwriting” (Williams). While both Williams and Green helped to create what is called the most recent renaissance of Black British theatre, it is truly Kwame Kwei-Armah that has risen within Britain’s Black arts scene.

Kwame Kwei-Armah a notable modern Black British playwright is also an actor, a director and a known political activist with a very strong understanding of Black theatre history. He was one of the few to help establish the Black Plays Archive at the National Theatre. However, he is most known for the trilogy of plays he wrote for the National Theatre when Black culture and arts were being debated in London. His first play, *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003), the first Black British play to open in the West End, discusses the difficulties faced by second-generation Black immigrants. The violence in *Elmina’s Kitchen* became very culturally comparative to Kwei-Armah’s, *Fix Up* in 2004, which explored the political working class in Britain. *Statement of Regret* (2007) was the last of the trio, formed around the intellectual middle class, exploring Britain’s role in the slave trade.

It is through Kwame Kwei-Armah that we see some of the current cross-over of cultural influences and affects between the U.S. and Britain. Having grown up in England in a middle class family and reaching a glass ceiling in the theatre world that he was unable to breach, Kwei-Armah moved to the United States to further his artistic career. “Kwei-Armah came to Baltimore having been invited to become artistic director of the state theatre, Center Stage, the kind of offer he never received in Britain” (Adams). In an interview with *The Guardian*, Kwei-Armah said,

‘To be honest, I had got to the point in London when I started to feel a little frustrated...I found myself moaning a lot about theatre. Why did they decide to put that on? How come he got to direct that? And why is it that they only want plays about black people who are part of the underclass or involved in street crime? Is it because those are the only types of plays about minorities that ageing white middle-aged reviewers feel they can understand?’

Kwei-Armah went on to discuss how many of the Black British playwright who were able to gain some success eventually, like him, had to leave England to further their careers. “One interesting thing,” Kwei-Armah says, “is what happened to the few of us who broke through or received some recognition in my generation. Chris Ofili now lives in Trinidad. Zadie Smith is in Italy and America. I am here (Baltimore). And so on and on. Nearly everyone you can think of moved away” (Adams). These artists along with Kwei-Armah have brought Black British theatre into America furthering the cultural exchange that has been happening throughout the 20th century. Kwei-Armah took over at Center Stage in 2011 and has been making waves ever since. In his first season at Center Stage Kwei-Armah jumped right into American racial politics. Having being told that he ‘had’ to do Bruce Norris's play *Clybourne Park*, a play that had recently won the 2011 Pulitzer prize for drama, and the Tony (in the U.S.) and Olivier (in Britain).

Clybourne Park was written in response to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, looking at the issues of gentrification and the failure of black/white integration over a 50 year period in a Chicago neighborhood. However Kwei-Armah was not excited to do this play as he felt that “the play reinforced racist stereotypes” (Adams) He felt that the message of the play, not necessarily the thing Bruce Norris intended, was that white flight from a neighborhood equaled black blight. Those whites build and blacks destroy. There was a line in the play that he thought

attacked black intelligence directly. When Kwei-Armah saw it the play at the Royal Court, he reported feeling, “insulted by it. Enraged. And what was worse was that in all the reviews I read of the play – written almost exclusively by middle-class white men – not one of them even hinted that they had seen that message in the play. It was a huge critical success” (Adams). To counteract the potentially harmful messages in *Clybourne Park*, Kwei-Armah put up a mixed season at Center Stage, delivering what he thought was a better-rounded message. It included the original *A Raisin in the Sun*, as well as a play he wrote for this occasion call *Beneatha's Place*. The production allowed him to respond directly to the racial issues he thought were present in *Clybourne Park*.

As clearly demonstrated in Kwame Kwei-Armah's situation, Black British playwrights and artists have started to become integrated into the American stage, encouraging and furthering cultural discussion about race, nationality, classism, and social cultural identity. Black British playwrights with African-Caribbean heritage face cultural and cultural identity conflicts. Joan-Ann Maynard commented on this saying:

When we come to consider the qualities and themes emerging in black British text...one recurring theme is the conflict between the older Caribbean born generation and the new British born generation, and their conflicting strategies for survival in an often hostile environment. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is the classic American example of this. British examples include *The Nine Night* by Edgar White; *Where There is Darkness* by Caryl Phillips; *Paper and Stone* by Zinnia and *A Hero's Welcome* by Winsome Pinnock. Linked to this theme is the demoralizing effect of exodus and exile with its consequent crisis of identity and striving for self-respect. Lennox Brown's *In the Autumn Romm*, *Sweet Talk* by Michael Abensetts are examples of these. The

disintegration and separation of the family is seen in *Running Dream* by Trish Cooke and *Strange Fruit* by Caryl Phillips...Plays set in the Caribbean featuring social and political issues have been a natural part of the work of those British based writers born in the Caribbean. These plays suggest a longing for home...Black British plays are constantly changing and maturing to meet changes in the social and political life of Britain, as Black people put down deeper roots in British society (Maynard 55).

This sense of yearning is realized in the play *Perseverance Drive*, the dynamic between family and religion with an abject longing to ones homeland, in this case Jamaica. The immigration of Black British families to England, while bringing hope of a better future to some, alienated others.

Perseverance Drive (2014 Bush Theatre) written by Robin Soans and directed by Madani Younis was a phenomenal production with an artful tale. Similar to the opening stasis of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, *Perseverance Drive* opens with a death in the family, in this case the matriarch that was the glue holding the family together. The setting of this story starts in Barbados with the death Grace Gillard, the mother of the story. We as the audience never get to meet Grace, but we learn a lot about her family as they all come together for Grace's funeral. At the head is Eli Gillard, played by Leo Wringer, the patriarch of the family, although strong in stating his beliefs, seems to have been easily swayed by his eldest son Nathan, played by Derek Ezenagu. Nathan is a pastor on his way to quickly becoming the minister of the church his parents founded; he and his wife Ruth (Frances Ashman) seem to be the most involved with his parents.

Next enters Zechariah played by Kolade Agoke, the second oldest son, with his fiery wife Joylene, played by Akiya Henry. Henry quickly starts trouble by reminding everyone that they

had been done a past wrong and were due recompense as well as fair if not better treatment. Last to arrive is the youngest son, the wayward Joshua, played by Clint Dyer. Josh receives the coldest welcome as he hasn't seen his family in years. This was all precipitated by a phone call years before from a man who Josh was dating, marking him as more than just the black sheep of this deeply religious Pentecostal family.

In a letter written by Grace to Ruth, Grace-begs her to help bring the family together in this time of grief but, pride, arrogance, jealousy, anger, and sibling rivalry seem to get in the way creating a simply destructive atmosphere at Grace's funeral, which ends in further estrangement of several members. Ruth can do little to settle the tempers that have flared and it seems that only Ruth and Josh are really there to honor the life that Grace lived; while the other two brothers seems to only be present for their own benefit to prove a point.

The story then skips to four years in the future. We are now in London. The house on "Perseverance Drive," that Grace wanted Josh and Ruth to have for the family was sold by Eli, the proceeds going into Nathan's church. We find Eli living alone in poor conditions with no-one for company or help. Josh enters the scene having come at Ruth's request. Slowly father and son pick up the pieces of their relationships, coming not only to understand each other but to also forgive past hurts. Josh in a moment asks his father "Where are your children when you need them?" "And you're too proud to ask for help yourself?" Josh was the only son to stay with his father Eli and take care of him when he needed it. In Josh we see an interesting figure because he was the son who was cast out from the home for his "sinful" nature, while the other two sons who had lived "righteous" lives abandoned Eli in his greatest time of need because they were "too busy with their churches" to help their own father.

This abandonment is eerily familiar to the plot of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, except with a reversal of gender in the ungrateful children. King Lear gives all that he has to his oldest two daughters after they verbally affirm their love for him, and nothing to his youngest when she says she cannot describe her love for him. The older two daughters later betray him when he seeks their assistance. They have become clouded with envy, pride, and greed (3 of the 7 deadly sins) and they deny their father the very love they swore to have for him.

It is later only the love of his youngest daughter, Cordelia, which saves King Lear. Although, he gave her nothing in the face of her love and even went so far as to scorn and banish her for being unable to articulate it. Cordelia gave all that she had to help him, demonstrating her love for him through her actions and not her words unlike her sisters previously did falsely. Just as King Lear trusted and gifted his oldest daughters with the greatest of his kingdom, Eli trusted his oldest sons and gifted them with his support, the house in Barbados, as well as the church he founded with his deceased wife. By the end of both plays, King Lear and Eli are experiencing the later years of their lives and take a moment to look back on decisions made and time lost to mistakes that neither of these families will ever get back.

Ruth is an interesting character study. Her character holds the most complexities within the play. When we first meet her we see a kind, caring, helpful, young woman, who is the one soft balancing voice amongst all the volatile conversations. As the play progresses Ruth gains depth. We learn that she was previously an artist and art teacher, but was forced by her husband to choose between her love of art and love of ministry when he decided to become a minister. He implied that if she was dedicated to the ministry and God then she would give up all her connection to the arts and put all her energy into ministry.

As the strife in the family increases we see just how unhappy Ruth actually is in her marriage. She is dedicated to her faith but stuck in a loveless marriage with a spouse that doesn't respect her or really even consider her opinions. The only things that she seems to live for are her kids and the church; although she is forced to acquiesce to all her husband's demands. Marvin Clarke (Ray Shell), a young minister in the church, was actually a student of Ruth's from when she used to teach. He is now a grown man, and a quite handsome one at that, who is facing the same struggle Ruth, went through. Marvin must decide whether he should be true to his passion for art or to give his time whole heartedly over to the ministry. He asks Ruth opinion on the matter and she answers that he needs to "pick one, as he can do neither justice if he tries to do both."

Things get sticky as Ruth and Marvin grow closer through their mutual love of art and easy camaraderie. We see two souls that are meant to be together separated by a sad marriage and harsh circumstances. In the four years apart little has changed. Ruth and Marvin get on just as well as the did before, the only difference is that now Nathan has left for conferences in America and Marvin has come to London to help out with the church there. For seven years he's has been in Ruth's life aiding in the ministry, reading her children bed time stories and simply caring for her. They seem to be able to maintain a strictly friend/minister status until Ruth gives two of her latest paintings to Marvin and he in return expresses his feelings. Sealing the moment with a kiss, Marvin grabs Ruth by the shoulders and tells her that he loves hers.

However lovely it is, the moment doesn't last as Ruth reminds him why they cannot be together. She is still married despite how loveless a marriage it might be and she will not give up her whole life for what she calls a moment of pleasure. She loves her children and will not abandon them, so it does she believe in her faith and she will not betray it. This ending, though

not satisfying to the viewer, is more faithful of real situations. Robin Soans accomplishes this through his play-text.

To conclude, Great Britain and The United States of America have had a long standing parent/child relationship throughout the past which has recently changed. The cultural exchange between American and British society in recent years has been a constant back and forth flow of information, ideas, music, arts, trade and economics. This is especially evident in the later 20th and early 21st century. However, despite this cultural exchange, the paths of Blacks in America and Blacks in Britain have been distinctly different.

They have had a dance of a close cultural exchange with times of distinct separate evolutions, in which the two cultures separate, only to join again and exchange their newly developed ideas. In recent years, of each other African American Theatre has influenced and been influenced by Black British Theatre. Black British culture is interesting in that its origins are very different from that of African Americans. These differences are demonstrated and directly reflected in the plays and theatre produced from each culture and the subsequent interpretation of them.

Historically, England abolished slavery in 1833, decades before America in 1865, causing the split experience that African Americans and Black British people experience today. The 1920s brought the Harlem Renaissance in America along with the beginning of African American theatre. This cultural explosion soon leaked over into Britain affecting the Black Arts scene there. The 1940s-1950s showed a rise in Black American influence across the sea. The Civil Rights Movement in America grew to also ignite social reform in England; including a revolution of the Black arts scene in Britain. African American plays, such as *The Amen Corner*

and *A Raisin in the Sun*, have swept the stages of London inspiring Black British playwrights to emerge, create, and record their own legacy.

African American plays reach to tell the untold story and record the previously shielded history of Blacks in America, redefining Black culture in the eyes of its audiences. Black British theatre also stretches audiences to come into contact with a culture they were previously unfamiliar with. Characters in both styles of theatre face similar issues and problems. Themes of family, religion, culture, history, and cultural identity are prevalent and well defined.

Today the cultural exchange between Black theatre arts in Britain and The U.S. are stronger than ever with Black British playwrights entering the American theatre scene, Kwame Kwei-Armah is a prime example. As the playwright and Artistic Director of Double Edge Theatre Company, Michael McMillan, said:

To talk of black theatre, is to talk of a Black Arts movement and like similar movements on cultural history, it has emerged to broaden our understanding of the world, to sensitize us emotionally and intellectually, and bring blackness to our consciousness, to challenge the status quo (McMillan 58).

Black theatre should challenge the current status quo, wherever it goes. Black British Theatre is rarely spoken of in American Theatre much less in American Theatre class rooms. I would like to share all that I have learned with the university expanding the cultural awareness and appreciation of the arts. I believe that this research will have a positive impact on The Ohio State University's educational arts community.

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